THE STORY OF *Gentleman* JACQUES PORLIER

AS TOLD BY
JACK RUDOLPH

JACQUES PORLIER WAS A GENTLEMAN... HE WAS BORN, RAISED AND EDUCATED IN THE MOST CULTURED AND EXCLUSIVE CIRCLES OF OLD MONTREAL.

PORLIER WAS A TUTOR TO THE GRIGNON CHILDREN, A JOB THAT PROBABLY RANKS HIM AS THE FIRST SCHOOL TEACHER IN WISCONSIN.

HE WOULD PERFORM A MARRIAGE CEREMONY FIRST IN ENGLISH AND THEN IN FRENCH

IN SEPTEMBER 1820 HE WAS APPOINTED CHIEF JUSTICE OF BROWN COUNTY.. HE WAS ALSO JUDGE OF PROBATE UNTIL 1822 WHEN HE RESIGNED

IN 1805 PORLIER PURCHASED THE HOUSE BUILT BY JOSEPH ROI, NOW FAMOUS AS ROI-PORLIER-TANK COTTAGE .. THIS BUILDING CAN BE SEEN TODAY IN GREEN BAY'S TANK PARK.

Aristocrat on Frontier

Jacques Porlier, French Gentleman

By JACK RUDOLPH
Press-Gazette Staff Writer

A frontier is a magnet for many kinds of men: Adventurers, fugitives, misfits, the weak and the strong. It even attracts gentlemen.

Jacques Porlier was a gentleman. He must have seemed strangely out of place at times in the crude Wisconsin wilderness, but he came because he liked it and he stayed for almost 50 years.

Born, raised and educated in the most cultured and exclusive circles of old Montreal, the suave and polished Porlier turned his back on a secure social and financial future when he was 26 and elected to spend the rest of his long life on the frontier. He had little reason except personal preference to do so, but he never regretted it and in the long run added more than his share to the development of the struggling settlement at La-Baye.

Educated in Montreal

Jacques Porlier was born in 1765, apparently a descendent of minor French nobility. Originally intended for the priesthood he was educated in the best Montreal schools but changed his mind and entered his father's large fur trading business instead.

In 1783 he visited the western country, fell in love with its raw beauty and immensity and in 1791 made his move. He abandoned a budding career in Montreal society to do it, having only a short time before been commissioned captain-lieutenant of militia, a post open only to the socially elect.

Porlier came to Green Bay as a clerk for Pierre Grignon and tutor to the Grignon children, a job that probably ranks him as the first school teacher in Wisconsin. Two years later he struck out for himself as an independent fur trader. He remained in the business until shortly before his death, even while deeply involved in public affairs.

Rival of John Lawe

He was a business rival of John Lawe and his old employers, with whom he always remained on the most intimate terms outside business hours. He established his base of operations on the west bank of the Fox River directly opposite Lawe's Point. In 1805 he purchased the house built by Joseph Roi, now famous as the Roe-Porlier-Tan Cottage, oldest building in Wisconsin.

In 1793 Porlier married Marguerite Griesie, whom he found living with her Indian mother in a Menominee village on the St. Croix River. Marguerite's father had been his predecessor as clerk for Grignon and had abandoned his family.

Porlier's marriage was different from the usual run of white-Indian common law alliances. The couple remained together for nearly half a century, Marguerite surviving him by five years. They had several children, three of whom were still living in the 1880s.

Appointed for Prestige

In 1812 Porlier was appointed British justice of the peace, a commission renewed in 1815, shortly before the end of the War of 1812, when he was also commissioned captain of militia at Green Bay. Nearly 50 at the time, he was too old for active service, and the appointment was probably intended to utilize his prestige in the area.

After the war Porlier took the oath of allegiance to the United States and became an American citizen in 1821. Meanwhile he had been appointed to a series of important positions by territorial governors. He became an ensign of militia in 1819 and a lieutenant in 1822, although he was then 57 years of age.

In September of 1820 he was appointed chief justice of Brown County, a dignity he held until the organization of Wisconsin as a territory in 1836. At the same time he functioned as justice of the peace and county commissioner.

Draw Up Documents

He was also judge of probate, which office he resigned in 1822. Because he was the most educated man in the settlement, all public and business ducuments were drawn up by him, a service he usually performed free of charge.

Although he could read English he could not or would not speak it. A quirk that afforded the later American settlers considerable amusement was his habit, when performing a marriage ceremony, of reading the service first in English and then in French. He was well aware it wasn't necessary but he just felt better about doing it that way.

Another example of his conscientious devotion to exactness was revealed when the old French laws were replaced by the laws of Michigan Territory in 1822. Porlier carefully and laboriously translated the entire code from English into French for his own reference and use. The handwritten manuscript is now one of the treasures of the State Historical Society.

Fell Into Debt

As a fur trader Porlier was typical of the pre-American breed, open handed and careless about costs and accounts. In partnership with Lawe and the Grignons he fell into heavy debt to the American Fur Co., to which he mortgaged his extensive land holdings in the Fox River Valley.

When the company called his notes in 1834 he was unable to pay and lost everything except his cherished home. A stroke shortly after the disaster, which left his right side completely paralyzed, was believed to have been brought on by the foreclosure.

Suave, courtly and gallant, Porlier was held in considerable awe by most of his associates, who deferred to him in every way, particularly in his later years. Fully conscious of his position and titles, he was very proper and probably a little arrogant.

All Mirth Subsided

At least Austin Grignon recalled years later that at every social gathering — and none was complete without him — the old gentleman knew how and when to make an entrance. "On his entrance," Grignon declared, "all mirth and impertinence subsided and the company deferred to and awarded him the post of honor."

He was a man of culture and fastidious tastes, none of which ever rubbed off on the crude bark of Wisconsin's wilderness, and remarkable for the grammatical purity and elegance of his French speech. The executive and formal garden he personally groomed around his home was his pride and joy.

Porlier was a slight, wiry man about five feet ten inches tall, with a light complexion and sandy hair. In middle age he became partly bald and his remaining hair finally turned grey. Despite the paralysis of his last three years he carried himself with great dignity to the very end.

He died after an illness of only two or three days on July 12, 1839, at the age of 74. He was probably buried in Alouez Cemetery in a section whose grave markings disintegrated years ago. Because of the complete lack of early cemetery records the location of his grave has been lost.